HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN'S

The Little Mermaid

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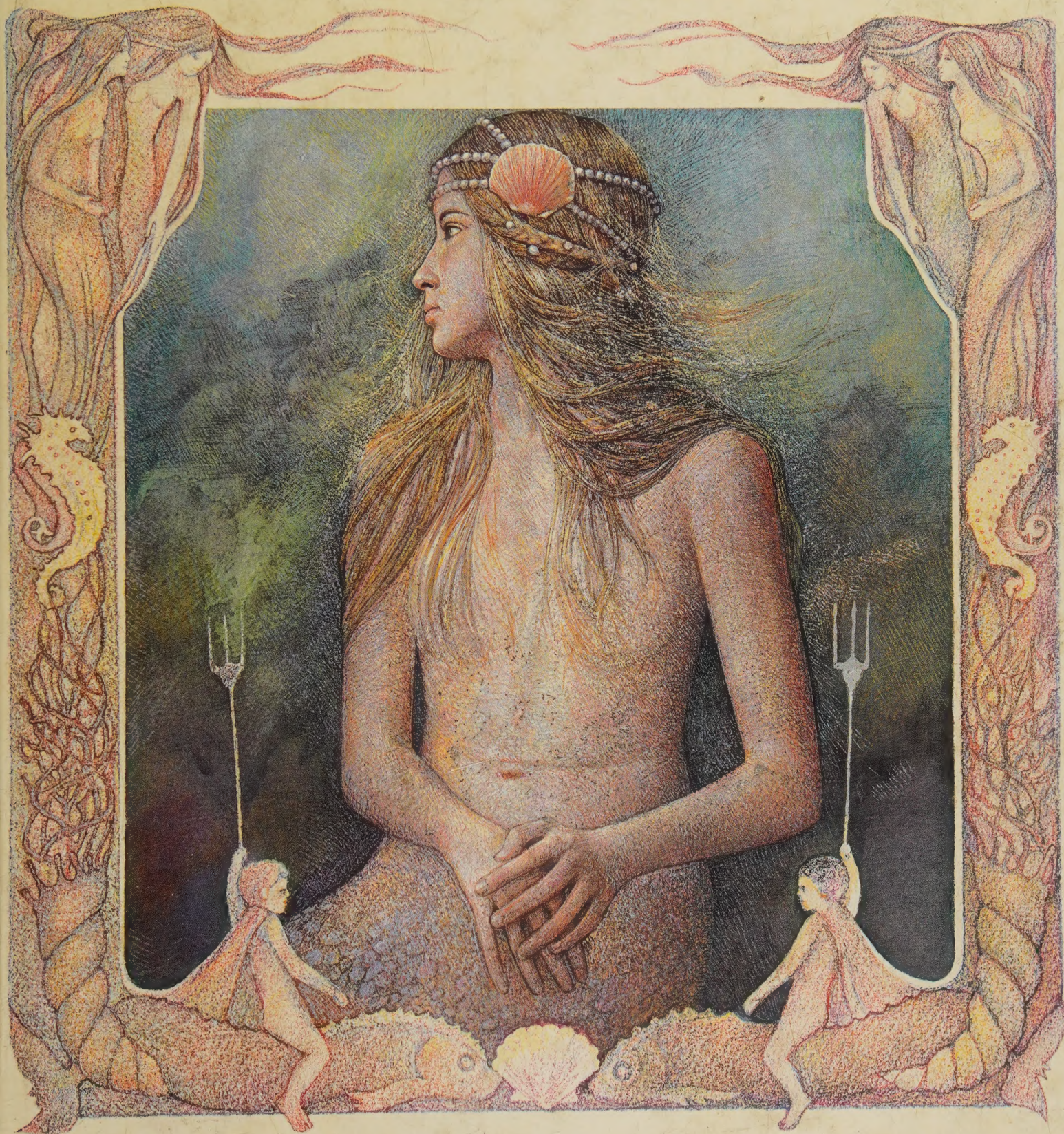

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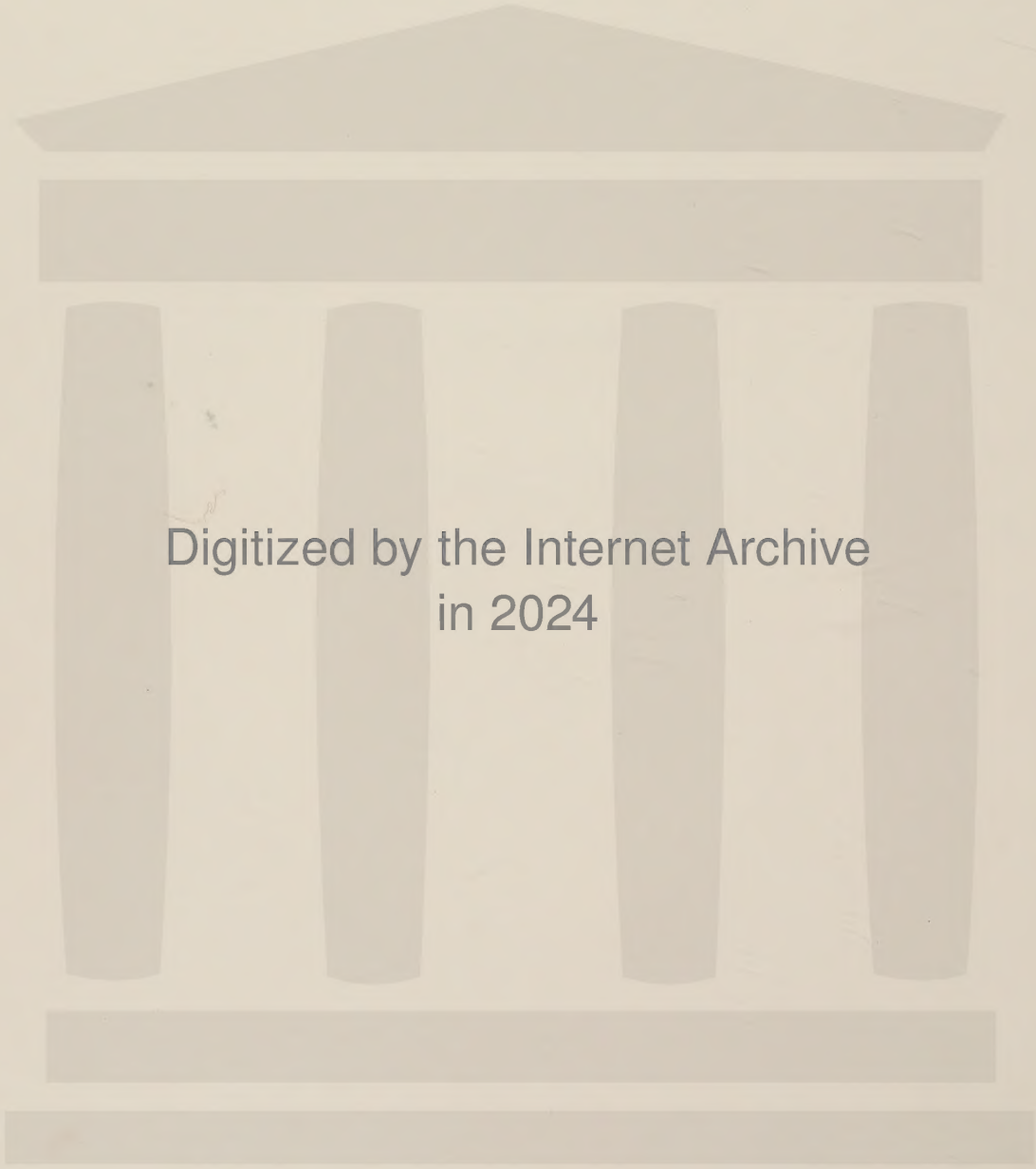
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The Little Mermaid

To Mario Mattolini, Bruno Nardini and to my wife Armida

L.G.

For those who sustain with love

M.M.

HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN'S

The Little Mermaid

ILLUSTRATED BY LASZLO GAL

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MARGARET CRAWFORD MALONEY

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Far out at sea the water is as blue as cornflowers and as clear as crystal. But it is deeper than any anchor can reach or many church spires one upon another could fathom. Do not imagine that only bare white sand rests below. Far from it! Wondrous trees and flowers grow and sway in the water like living beings. Fish, great and small, glide among the branches as birds fly in air. A blue radiance bathes everything as though one were amid the heavens rather than at the bottom of the sea. And in calm weather the sun shimmers like a luminous purple flower.

Here dwell the mer-people. Where the sea lies deepest stands the palace of the mer-king, its walls of coral with high arched amber windows, its roof of shells that open and close with the tide, each containing a lustrous pearl worthy of a crown jewel.

The mer-king had long been widowed, so his wise and aged mother kept his house. She was very proud of her noble birth and wore twelve oysters on her tail where others were permitted only half as many. Her devoted care of six beautiful granddaughters was most praiseworthy. The youngest was the loveliest, with skin as soft as a rose petal and eyes as blue as the sea. Each day the princesses played in the palace halls where flowers bloomed from the walls. The great windows opened and fish darted through as swallows do into our houses; fearlessly they ate from the mer-children's hands and let themselves be stroked.

Outside the palace was a garden with crimson and indigo trees whose fruit sparkled like gold and whose blossoms glowed like fire. The ground was of finest sand, violet as sulphur flame. Here each princess had her own garden plot where she might dig and sow as she liked. One chose to plant in the shape of a whale, another preferred the figure of a mermaid, but the youngest made hers round like the sun, with bright red flowers.

She was a strange child, quiet and thoughtful. While her sisters decorated their gardens with trinkets from shipwrecks, she asked only for a marble statue of a handsome youth from a sunken vessel. Beside her statue she planted a red weeping willow. The tree grew, and when its boughs brushed the violet sand, it cast moving shadows as if leaves and roots embraced.

Nothing enthralled the little princesses more than tales of the human world above. Their grandmother told of ships, towns, people and animals. The mermaids

delighted to hear that, unlike those of the sea, earthly flowers had fragrance, that woods were green, that the fish among the branches could sing sweetly. The old lady meant birds but chose words her grandchildren could understand.

"When you are fifteen," she told them, "you may rise to the surface and sit by moonlight on the rocks to watch the ships. Then you shall learn of cities and men."

The following year the eldest would reach this desired moment, but the youngest had five long years to wait, for the sisters were about twelve months apart in age. Each promised to tell the others what first she saw and impressed her most, for their grandmother could never satisfy their curiosity.

None yearned to see the human world as did the youngest princess. Many a night she stood by her open window looking up through the dark blue water at the swirling fish. She could see the moon and stars shining faintly but appearing larger than they do to us. If a shadow passed, she knew it was either a whale or a ship carrying people. Those on board never imagined that far beneath a little mermaid stretched her hands towards the keel.

The eldest princess became fifteen and ventured above the water. On her return she had a thousand things to relate. Her greatest pleasure had been to lie on a sandbank and watch a great city where lights twinkled like stars and music played amid the distant noise of carriages and men. She had seen church steeples and heard their bells chime. Because she could not go on shore, she longed to all the more.

How attentively the little mermaid listened! Late in the evening when she gazed upwards, she imagined the great city full of life and sound.

The next year the second sister was allowed to swim wherever she pleased. She rose just as the sun was setting and declared this the most magnificent sight. The whole sky turned to gold. Crimson and violet clouds sailed above her, but far swifter, a flock of wild swans flew into the sunset. She too swam towards the horizon as the rosy hue faded from sea and sky.

The third and most daring sister's turn followed. She swam up a broad river. She saw green hills covered with vines, and castles and farms rising among woods. Birds sang and the sun shone so warmly she often had to dive to cool herself. In a small cove she found children splashing naked in the water. She wished to join their play, but the children fled in fear and a little black animal (she had never seen a dog) barked so fiercely that she quickly swam back to sea. But she could not forget the lovely woods and hills nor the children who could swim without fishtails.

The fourth sister was more timid. She remained far out from land where one could see for miles and the sky appeared as a glass dome. Dolphins somersaulted and whales spouted like fountains, and distant ships looked like seagulls.

The fifth sister's birthday fell in winter, so she saw different things than had the others. The sea was green, with huge floating icebergs that glittered like diamonds and took strange shapes, higher than church spires. She climbed upon one, her hair streaming in the wind, and ships steered away in alarm. Towards evening, clouds darkened the sky, thunder rolled, lightning flared. The ships reefed sail and their crews trembled. Still the mermaid calmly sat, watching the flashing light as the black sea heaved.

The first time each sister rose above the water she was entranced by the new and wondrous sights, but soon wearied of this freedom and strangeness, preferring the sea bottom to the upper world. Even so, the five sometimes would swim together to the surface and sing with voices sweeter than any mortal's. In raging storms they would go before endangered ships, describing the delights of the deep and enticing sailors to follow bravely. But the wind drowned out their words. When a vessel sank, only dead men entered the mer-king's palace.

On such nights the youngest remained sadly alone. Because mermaids have no tears, she suffered all the more. "If only I were fifteen! How I shall love the world and those who dwell there."

At last her birthday came. "Now you are grown," said her grandmother, the dowager queen. "Let me adorn you like your sisters." Round her hair the queen put a wreath of white lilies, with each petal half a pearl, and to her tail the old lady fixed eight great oysters to show the princess's high rank.

"But that hurts so!" exclaimed the little mermaid. "Beauty pays a price," replied her grandmother. How gladly she would have shaken off this grandeur, but she dared not. "Farewell," she cried, rising as a bubble through the water.

The sun had just set as she lifted her head above the waves, yet the clouds glowed, rose and gold, and the evening star shone, bright and beautiful. The air was mild and fresh and the sea like a mirror. Before her lay a three-masted ship, with one sail set and the crew resting on the yards. Music and singing resounded, and as darkness fell, coloured lanterns waved like flags of every nation. The little mermaid swam close to a porthole, and as the waves swelled she could see many elegantly dressed people within. The handsomest was a prince with large, dark eyes. He was no older than sixteen, and it was his birthday also.

The sailors danced on deck, and as the prince joined them, hundreds of rockets lit the sky. In fright, the little mermaid dived beneath the water, for she had never seen fireworks. But she soon returned as all the stars in heaven seemed to fall about her. Large suns whirled around, fiery fish darted in the blue air, and everything was reflected in the still sea. It was so light she could see every detail of the ship. How handsome the young prince was! He shook hands and smiled while music drifted through the quiet night.

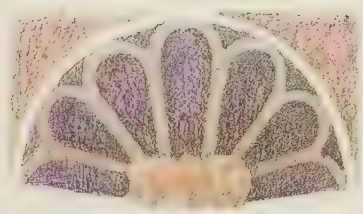
Though it grew late, the little mermaid could not tear herself away from the ship or the prince. The lanterns were put out, the fireworks ceased, the sea began to churn and moan. Still the little mermaid rocked upon the water, looking into the cabin. The ship gathered speed as one sail after another was unfurled. Soon the waves rose, clouds gathered and lightning flashed. A terrible storm approached, so the sails were reefed. The vessel flew over the rough sea, rolling between the mountainous waves or riding high on their billowing crests.

The little mermaid marvelled, but not so the sailors. The ship creaked and groaned, her planks gave way, and the main mast snapped like a reed. She lay over on her side and water rushed in. The little mermaid now realized their danger and her own peril amid the wreckage. One moment it was pitch-black and she could see

nothing, but then the lightning flared and everything was illuminated. As the vessel foundered she saw the prince sink into the sea. At first she was happy that he would come down to her, until she remembered that humans cannot live under water. He must not die!

Heedless of her safety, she searched among the waves and debris and at last she reached him. He was barely afloat. His strength was gone, his beautiful eyes closed. Surely he would have drowned had she not come. She held his head above water and let the waves carry them.

By daybreak the gale had passed. No trace of the ship survived. As the sun climbed higher, colour returned to the prince's cheeks, although his eyes remained shut. The mermaid kissed his noble brow and smoothed his wet hair. How he resembled the marble statue in her garden! She kissed him again and wished passionately that he might live.



Presently she saw land. She saw mountains, with snow like swan feathers upon their peaks, and a forest along the shore where stood a chapel or convent. Orange and lemon trees grew in its garden and tall palms swayed by the gate. Near the convent the sea formed a little inlet, calm but deep right up to the cliffs. There she swam with the prince and laid him on the fine white sand, his head raised to the warm sunshine.

Bells began to ring and many young maidens entered the garden. The little mermaid swam out behind some rocks and covered herself with foam so that she might watch the prince unseen. Soon one of the maidens drew near; for a moment she seemed frightened but then brought others. The mermaid saw the prince revive and smile at those around him. But he did not smile upon the little mermaid; he did not even know that she had saved him. Her heart saddened as he was taken inside, and she plunged to her father's palace.

Now she became even more withdrawn. When her sisters asked what first she had seen in the human world above, she told them nothing. Many an evening she returned to the place where she had left him. She saw the fruit ripen and the snow melt from the mountains, but never again did she see the prince. Each time she returned home more sorrowful. She sought comfort in her garden, her arms round the beautiful marble statue. From neglect, her flowers grew into a dark and gloomy wilderness.

Unable to conceal her loss any longer, she confided in one of her sisters, who told others. Among their closest friends who shared the secret was one who knew of the prince. She too had seen the celebration on shipboard and had learned where his kingdom lay. "Come, little sister," called the other princesses, and arms entwined, they rose out of the sea close to where the prince's palace stood.

The palace was built of glazed yellow stone with a broad marble staircase leading directly into the sea. Gilded cupolas crowned the roof and life-like statues stood between pillars surrounding the building. Through the tall, clear windows

one looked into magnificent rooms, hung with costly silks and tapestries. Splendid pictures covered the walls. In the largest hall a fountain sprayed jets towards the dome whence the sun glistened on the water and on the plants growing in the great pool.

Now that she knew where her beloved lived, she went there almost every evening. She swam much closer than the others dared. She even ventured up the narrow channel under the marble balcony. Here she would watch the young prince who believed himself alone in the moonlight.

Sometimes she observed him sailing to strains of music in his bannered ship. She peeped out through the green rushes, and if the wind caught her silver veil, anyone who noticed fancied it was a swan spreading its wings. Many a night she heard the fishermen, at sea with torches, tell of the goodness of the prince. Then she rejoiced that she had rescued him. She remembered how his head had rested on her shoulder and how she had kissed him. But he knew nothing of this nor even dreamt of her existence.

Human beings grew dearer to the little mermaid, and she longed for their company. Their world seemed larger than her own. They could sail across oceans and climb towering mountains; their lands stretched farther than her eyes could see. There was so much she wanted to know that her sisters could not answer. So she went to her grandmother who knew the upper world well.

"If humans do not drown," asked the mermaid, "can they live forever? Do they never die, as we do?"

"Yes," replied the old queen, "men too must die and their life on earth is much shorter. After three hundred years we cease to exist and become only foam on the water, without even a grave among those we love. We have no immortal soul but are like reeds that, once cut, can never more grow green. But humans have souls which live forever, even after their bodies become dust; they soar beyond the stars to heaven. Just as we rise out of the water to the earth above, so do they rise towards an unknown glorious place which we shall never behold."

"Why do we not have immortal souls?" asked the mermaid. "I would give all my three hundred years to be a human for one day and then to dwell in heaven."

"You must not think of that," said her grandmother. "We are much happier and more fortunate than men."

"Then I must die, float as foam and never again hear the waves or see the flowers or the sun? Can I do nothing to earn a soul?"

"No," answered her grandmother. "Only if a man so loved you that he cherished you above father or mother with all his heart and promised, while the

priest joined your hands, to be ever faithful. Then his soul would overflow into your body and you would share human happiness. But that can never be. What is considered beautiful here in the sea—your fishtail—would be thought ugly upon earth. To be admired there, one must have two clumsy supports which they call 'legs'!" The little mermaid sighed and looked mournfully at her tail. "Let us be content," continued the old lady. "We have three hundred years to leap and swim! Surely that is enough. Tonight we shall hold a court ball."

That evening in the mer-king's palace there was a glorious affair, unequalled on earth. The walls of the great ballroom were of thick, clear crystal. Enormous rose and green shells stood on all sides, each with a blue flame to light the hall and illuminate the sea beyond. Countless fish with gold, silver and purple scales swam outside the walls, and across the ballroom flowed a wide stream upon which the mermen and mermaids danced to their own sweet singing.

The little mermaid had the loveliest voice and the whole company applauded. For a moment joy filled her heart. But her thoughts soon returned to the world above. She could not forget the handsome prince or her sorrow at not possessing an immortal soul. So she stole away from the palace into her garden. Suddenly the echo of horns reached her through the water.

"He must be sailing above, he whom I love more than father or mother, he who constantly consumes my thoughts and to whom I would entrust my hope of happiness. I will risk all to win him and a soul like his! While my sisters dance I will go to the sea witch—though she terrifies me—and beg advice."

The little mermaid started towards the roaring whirlpools beyond which dwelt the witch. She had never gone that way before, where neither flowers nor sea grass bloomed. Only bare grey waste stretched to where the swirling water hurled all that it seized into the abyss. She must pass through these whirlpools, then cross the oozing mud of the witch's swamp to where her house lay in a dreadful wood.

As she neared the wood, she realized that the trees and bushes were polyps—half animals, half plants. Like hundred-headed snakes they grew out of the ground. Their branches were long, slimy arms with writhing, worm-like fingers. Whatever they clutched, they held fast. The little mermaid stopped in horror, her heart pounding. But then she remembered the prince and immortality, and her courage returned. She bound up her flowing hair so that the polyps might not grasp it, folded her hands over her breast, and sped through the water among the hideous growth. She noticed how they clung to things they had caught: whitened skulls of drowned humans, ship's rudders and chests, animal skeletons and—most terrible of all—a little mermaid whom they had strangled.

Finally she came to a clearing where immense water-snakes crawled in mire. In their midst stood a house built of the bones of those who had been shipwrecked. There sat the sea witch, feeding a toad as humans might a pet bird. She let the ugly serpents glide over her.

"I know your foolish wish," cackled the witch, "but it will bring you grief if you have your way, my lovely princess. You want to exchange your fishtail for two stumps to walk upon, like the beings of earth, so that the young prince may fall in love with you and you may win both him and an immortal soul." As she spoke the witch laughed so violently that the toad and snakes slithered to the ground.

"You have come just in time," she added. "After sunrise tomorrow I could not have helped you for another year. Now I will brew a potion. Before dawn you must swim to land, sit on the shore, and drink it. Your tail will divide and shrink into what humans call 'legs.' But you will feel pain as though you were cut with a sharp sword. All who behold you will say that you are the fairest mortal they have ever seen. Yet at each step you will feel as if you were treading upon knives until your blood flows. If you will endure all this, I can help."

"Yes!" answered the little mermaid with trembling voice as she thought of the prince and of a soul.

"Beware," warned the witch, "once you have a human body you can never again be a mermaid; you may not return to your sisters or to your father's palace. Should you fail to win the prince's love so that he forsake father and mother and centre all his joy in you, and a priest join your hands as man and wife—then neither shall you gain an immortal soul. The morning after he marries another, your heart will break and you will become foam on the water."

"Still I desire it," replied the mermaid, pale as death.

"Now, you must pay me," said the witch. "And it is no trifle that I ask. Of all the mer-people you have the sweetest voice, and it is with this that you hope to enchant the prince. But it is this, your most treasured possession, that I demand. For I must mix in my own blood to give the potion the sharpness of a double-edged sword."

"But if you take my voice," asked the princess, "what have I left?"

"Your beautiful body, your graceful movement, your eloquent eyes," retorted the witch. "Surely these can snare a human heart. Well! Do you falter? Put out your tongue so I may cut it off, for only then shall you have the potion."

"Let it be so," said the mermaid. The sea witch prepared her cauldron, muttering, "Cleanliness is a virtue" as she scoured the pot with a handful of knotted snakes. Then she scratched her breast and let her black blood drip into the cauldron on the fire. Steam rose in fearsome shapes, and as the witch kept adding things, the brew boiled with the sound of a weeping crocodile. At last the precious potion was ready.

The witch cut off the little mermaid's tongue so she could no longer speak or sing, then handed her the potion, which sparkled like purest water. "If the polyps should try to seize you on your return, just throw a single drop of this potion upon them and their arms will fly into a thousand pieces."

But the little mermaid had no cause; the polyps shrank back when they saw the vial which blazed menacingly in her hand. So she passed quickly through wood, swamp and whirlpools, and soon she drew near to the mer-king's palace. The torches had been extinguished in the ballroom. All within slept. She dared not go to her sisters for she could not explain she was leaving forever. How her heart ached. She crept into the garden and took a flower from each of her sisters' plots, blew a thousand kisses towards her home, then swam up through the dark blue sea.

The sun had not yet risen as she ascended the marble steps of the prince's palace. The moon still shone clearly. The little mermaid drank the potion, and it seemed as if a sword had transfixed her delicate body. She swooned to the ground. As the sun rose, she awoke and felt burning pain. She opened her eyes, and there before her stood the handsome prince, his dark eyes staring down at her. Her own gaze fell and she saw that in place of her fishtail she had two slender legs. To cover her nakedness, she wrapped herself in her long hair.

The prince asked who she was and whence she came. She smiled gently but sadly, unable to answer. He took her by the hand and led her within. At each step, as the witch had warned, she suffered as though she walked on sharp knives, yet she bore it gladly and moved as lightly as a bubble beside the prince. When she had been clothed in costly silks and muslins, none was more beautiful and all wondered at her grace.

Lovely slaves in rich brocade appeared to sing before the court. One sang more sweetly than the rest, and the prince smiled and applauded. Then the little mermaid sorrowed, for she knew that once she had sung far better. Silently she thought: "If only he knew what I sacrificed to be with him!" When the slaves began to dance, the little mermaid lifted her white arms, rose to the tips of her toes and glided over the floor as no other. Every motion displayed her perfect symmetry and elegance; her eyes spoke more deeply to the heart than did the songs of the slaves. Everyone was enchanted, especially the prince, who called her his little foundling. She danced again and again, though at every step her feet felt cut by swords.

The prince declared she must never leave him and prepared a bed of velvet cushions for her outside his door. He had a page's clothes made for her so that she might accompany him on horseback. Together they rode through the woods, boughs brushing their shoulders, birds singing. They climbed the mountains, and though her feet bled, she only laughed and followed higher until the clouds beneath looked like migrating flocks.

At night, as the palace slept, she would descend the marble steps to bathe her burning feet in the cold sea and to think of her dear ones who dwelt below. One evening her sisters came, arms entwined, singing mournfully, and she beckoned to them. They recognized her and told her how she had grieved them. Then they visited every night. Once, far out, she saw her grandmother, who had not risen for many years, and her father the mer-king, wearing their silver crowns. They too reached out to her, yet they dared not swim closer to land.

Day by day the prince grew fonder of her as one loves a dear, good child. But never did he imagine marrying her. Yet, unless she became his wife she could not possess an immortal soul. "Do you not love me above all others?" her eyes begged as he took her in his arms and kissed her fair brow.

"Yes, you are dearest to me," he answered, "for you have the kindest heart and love me so. You resemble a maiden whom once I saw. I was shipwrecked and cast on shore near a holy temple where young maidens lived. One found me and saved my life. She alone could I love, though you are so like her that you almost take her place in my memory. She belongs to the temple, so fortune has sent me you. We shall never part."

"Alas, he does not realize it was I who rescued him," thought the little mermaid. "After I left him on the sand, I saw this maiden whom he now loves

more." And the mermaid sighed for she could not weep. "They will not meet again, but I am here with him. I will cherish him and devote my life to him."

Soon rumours spread that the prince would marry the beautiful daughter of a neighbouring king and that a splendid ship was to be built for his voyage. The little mermaid shook her head for she knew the prince's inner thoughts.

"I must journey to see this princess as my parents desire," he explained. "But I cannot love her nor return with her as my bride. She could not remind me of the maiden at the temple as you do. I would rather choose you with your eloquent eyes, my silent foundling." And he kissed her and stroked her hair, laying his head upon her heart so that it dreamt of human happiness and of an immortal soul.

"Do you not fear the sea, little one?" he asked as they stood on the deck. Then he told her of storms and calm, of the strange fish of the deep and of what divers saw. She smiled at his tales for she knew them better than any mortal could.

In the moonlight, with only the helmsman awake, she stared over the rail. She fancied she saw the mer-king's palace, with her grandmother looking up through the rushing tide at the keel. Suddenly her sisters rose, wringing their hands. She beckoned and longed to tell them she was happy, but the cabin boy approached and the sea princesses dived so quickly he thought he had seen only flecks of white foam.

The next morning the ship entered the harbour of the neighbouring kingdom. Bells pealed and trumpets sounded from high towers, while soldiers paraded with flying colours and flashing bayonets. Though each day brought new festivities, still the princess did not appear. People said she was at a convent far away, being educated in every royal virtue.

At last she arrived. The little mermaid was eager to see her and had to admit that she had never beheld one so beautiful. The princess's skin was soft and delicate, and behind long, dark lashes smiled steadfast eyes of deepest blue.

"You are she," cried the prince, "who saved me as I lay lifeless on the shore," and he clasped his promised bride to his heart. "Oh I am too happy!" he exclaimed to the little mermaid. "That which I never dared to hope has happened! In your love you must share my joy." The little mermaid kissed his hand and felt her heart breaking. The morning after his wedding would bring her death.

Church bells rang and heralds proclaimed the betrothal. Fragrant oil burned in silver altar lamps and priests swung their censers. The bride and bridegroom joined hands and received the bishop's blessing. The little mermaid, dressed in gold and silk, held the bride's train. But her ears heard no festive music and her eyes saw no ceremony. She thought only of her approaching end and of all that she had lost.

In the evening the couple boarded the ship. Cannons fired, banners waved and a royal tent of purple and gold, furnished with luxurious cushions, was arranged for the bridal chamber. The wind swelled the sails and the ship swept over the translucent sea. As darkness fell, coloured lanterns were hung and the sailors danced on deck. The little mermaid recalled the first time she had emerged from the sea and seen such a spectacle.

She whirled into the dance, darting like a frightened swallow. All cried in delight, for never had she danced so. Although her feet seemed slashed by knives, she felt no pain; a sharper sword had pierced her heart. This was the final evening that she would see him for whom she had forsaken family and home, given up her enchanting voice and suffered daily torment. This was the last time she would breathe the same air as he or enjoy the starry sky and deep sea. An endless, dreamless night awaited her, for she had no soul and now no hope.

Merriment prevailed on board till long past midnight, and with despair in her heart, the mermaid continued dancing. Then the prince kissed his bride and hand in hand they retired to the royal tent. All on board slept except the helmsman and the little mermaid, who leaned on the rail looking eastward for the first blush of dawn, the first hint of the sun's rays which would signal her death.

Suddenly her sisters rose out of the sea. They were pale and their flowing hair no longer floated on the wind. It had been cut off. "We have given it to the witch so she might help us save you. Look! She has sent a sharp knife. Before sunrise you must plunge it into the prince's heart. As his warm blood falls on your feet they will grow together into a fishtail and you will become a mermaid once more and return with us to live out your three hundred years. Hurry! Either he or you must die. Our grandmother grieves so that her white hair has fallen away as did ours under the witch's shears. Kill the prince and come! Do you not see the red streak in the sky? In a few moments the sun will rise and you will be lost forever." With a strange, deep sigh they sank beneath the waves.

The little mermaid drew aside the purple curtain of the tent and saw the bride asleep upon the prince's shoulder. She bent and kissed his forehead, then looked at the sky where dawn was spreading. She stared at the knife and again fixed her eyes on the prince. In his sleep he murmured the name of his bride who alone occupied his thoughts. The knife quivered in the little mermaid's hand. Quickly she flung it far out into the waves, and where it fell the water blazed red and spurted up like drops of blood. With a last lingering glance at the prince she hurled herself into the sea.

The sun now rose, its rays falling mild and warm on the cold sea foam. But the little mermaid did not feel death. Above her in the bright light hovered hundreds of lovely beings. Through their transparent bodies she could see the white sails of the ship and the rosy clouds of the sky. Their voices were so sublime and ethereal that no human ear could hear them, just as no earthly eye could see their fragile forms. The little mermaid realized that she too was like them.

"Where am I going?" she asked as she felt herself rise. Her voice echoed their melodious otherworldly tone.

"To the daughters of the air," they answered. "A mermaid has no immortal soul and can never gain one unless she wins the love of a mortal. Eternal life lies beyond her power. Neither do the daughters of the air have souls, though by noble deeds we may earn them. We blow cool breezes to tropical countries where the sultry air breeds plague. We spread the refreshment and healing of flowers among the sick. And after three hundred years of striving for goodness, we receive souls and share the everlasting happiness of mankind. Poor little mermaid, you have yearned for this with your whole heart. You have suffered and endured bravely, and have raised yourself to the realm of the spirits of the air. Now by your own actions you can merit an immortal soul."

"Thus in time I shall enter paradise!" she cried.

"You may reach it even sooner," whispered one, "for unseen we float into the homes of human beings, and if we find a good child who brings delight to his parents we smile in joy and our time of trial is shortened by one year. But if we see a naughty or unkind child we weep in sorrow, and for every tear a day is added to our three hundred years."

On the ship life resumed. The mermaid saw the prince and his princess search for her, then gaze sorrowfully at the bubbling foam as if they knew she had thrown herself into the depths. Invisible, she kissed the bride's brow, smiled on the prince, then soared aloft with the other spirits of air. And as the little mermaid lifted her arms towards the sun, for the first time she felt tears.

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